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CIA Cited as Supplier for Planes to Nicaraguan Rebels

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A raid by U.S.-backed rebels in Nicaragua two weeks ago was executed with three rocket-equipped aircraft supplied by the Central Intelligence Agency as part of what congressional critics charge may be an administration effort to circumvent strict spending limits on its "secret war" in Central America.

The assault on a Nicaraguan military school near the Honduran border gained notice in the United States because two Americans participating with the rebels were killed. The two, who had traveled to Central America to "fight communism," died when Nicaraguan troops shot down a rebel helicopter in which the pair was riding.

Although the helicopter crash and the dead Americans drew widespread attention in this country, the attack was possibly more notable as the first known instance of rebel use of multiple aircraft in coordination with attacking ground troops. Moreover, the previously unknown guerrilla possession of the three aircraft, all Cessna O2A observation planes specially outfitted with rocket pods, marks a significant escalation in firepower for the rebels.

Both the CIA and the *contras*, as the rebels are known, declined comment on where the planes came from or how they ended up flying over the northern Nicaraguan jungle. But information gathered through sources in Congress, federal agencies, the aircraft industry and through public documents indicate that the three planes traveled a long and circuitous route that began last December at a National Guard airport beside the Hudson River in New York State.

In less than four months, custody of the planes moved from the U.S. Air Force, to a top-secret Joint Chiefs of Staff operation code-named "Elephant Herd," to the CIA, through a Delaware aviation company where they were armed, and ultimately to the *contras*.

The nature of these transactions has raised questions about possible cooperation between the Defense Department and the CIA to circumvent an explicit congressional ban on supplying arms and equipment beyond the \$24 million specifically appropriated to the CIA for aiding the rebels during this fiscal year.

A senior administration official, who could not comment on the specific aircraft used in the Sept. 1 raid, said yesterday that several other small noncombatant military aircraft have been transferred from the Air Force to the *contras* through the CIA.

In letters sent Thursday to Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger and CIA Director William Casey, Sen. Jim Sasser (D-Tenn.) requested an explanation of what happened to three Air Force Cessna O2As that disappeared from government records after being declared "excess" last December. He charged that "transfer of surplus military equipment at no cost to support *contra* operations would . . . represent an outlay in excess of the CIA legal spending limit . . ."

The Defense Department responded to Sasser's letter yesterday by informing his office that top-secret documents show the planes were transferred to the Joint Chiefs' "Elephant Herd" operation. It said the papers will be made available Monday to him and to the House and Senate intelligence committees.

Congress refused administration requests for additional funding for the *contras* this fiscal year. Both the CIA and the *contras* have said that current funds were exhausted last May.

In the much publicized *contra* raid two weeks ago in Nicaragua, the three O2As escaped without being downed by Sandinista ground fire. The Reagan administration, which charges the leftist Sandinista government with exporting communism in Central America, says the rebel attack killed at least four

senior Cuban

Sandinista government disputes this, saying the *contras*' rockets killed three children and a cook at the training school.

An account of how these three Cessnas apparently were secretly transferred from the New York Air National Guard to Central America—with a stopover for armaments at a private airfield tucked away in the cornfields of rural Delaware—is a case study in the conduct of one aspect of the "secret war" that has been financed by the CIA since December of 1981, when President Reagan first approved covert assistance to the *contras*.

About \$80 million in covert assistance has been provided formally to the rebels since the program began. Members of the House Intelligence Committee, however, have been concerned for several months that the CIA has developed backdoor mechanisms to supply additional materiel to the rebels.

Large amounts of equipment have been transferred from Defense to the CIA for the rebels, according to Richard C. Lawrence, who until last fall was director of Central American affairs in the office of Nestor Sanchez, deputy assistant secretary for Inter-American affairs.

"We gave the agency pretty much anything they wanted. In war they're a fourth branch of the service. There is a terrible gray area about what to do in semi-declared wars [such as the "secret war" between U.S.-supported rebels and Nicaragua]. It helps to have the [Defense Department] and CIA working together in this situation," Lawrence said yesterday in a telephone interview from his home in Santa Fe, N.M. He was repeating comments he made in a magazine interview this summer.

Lawrence added that the transfer of equipment between Defense and the CIA was done under a "strict accounting procedure."

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